

For Denisonians

THIS WAS A

GOOD DAM IDEA, especially for the cantankerous Red. From its beginnings in the high plains of New Mexico, the unpredictable Red River flows eastward toward the Mississippi, forming the boundary between the states of Oklahoma and Texas.

But while much support came from south of the river bottom, the idea of damming the Red near Denison actually arose on both sides.

On the Texas side, historian Settle singles out two Denisonians: George D. Moulton, “the father of the dam idea,” and Dr. Alex W. Acheson, who wanted to bring navigation up the river to Denison. Moulton championed the idea of a dam at Baer’s Ferry on the Red River at a site that the Corps eventually did choose. Moulton even created a model display of a dam at that location to argue his point.

On the Oklahoma side, Durant newspaper publisher G.W. Archibald became interested in the dam in 1933 and formed a close friendship with Rep. Sam Rayburn. This relationship turned out to be pivotal in the long fight to secure the dam. Archibald was even appointed for a time to the Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, although he was later removed by Oklahoma Gov. Leon “Red” Phillips, whose opposition to the dam became legendary.⁶

The dam was also supported by rural electric interests who saw public power as the solution to the lack of energy in their regions.⁷

Other forces helped to bring the dam to reality. There were the vigilant Chambers of Commerce in Denison and Durant; the active Red River Flood Control and Navigation Association at Denison as well as the Oklahoma Red River Flood Control Association at Durant. There was even the Red River Valley Improvement Association, which included members from Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

A 1928 analysis by the Corps’ Vicksburg District had found insufficient economic justification for a navigation, flood control, or hydroelectric power project in the Denison area. But after a 1938 restudy, again by Vicksburg, the Corps recommended construction of a \$54 million dam for flood control and power.

Congress authorized the project in 1938. It had, of course, the backing of Sam Rayburn, who personally won the support of President Roosevelt. Years later, after Texoma was filled, Rayburn would affectionately call it “my lake.”⁸

By this time the area was under the jurisdiction of the Little Rock District, which had been created in 1937 and included the Red River basin above Fulton, Arkansas.

It was a period of great movement on federal water resources projects. “I can get money for a dam easier than I can get money for my own breakfast,” said Oklahoma Sen. Elmer Thomas, who sliced the Corps’ money pie as chair of the Army appropriations subcommittee.

It was

RED AGAINST THE RED

dam. The project was marching along at record speed until it struck opposition in the person of the angry Oklahoma governor, a proponent of private, but not public, power. Red Phillips, whom historians classify as a reactionary, fumed and fought Roosevelt’s New Deal ways, and according to him, damming rivers was one of those ways.

With “consuming obsession [and] unfurling the discarded banner of state’s rights, the governor threw up every possible obstacle to Washington’s construction of dams on the Red and Grand rivers,” according to Oklahoma historian Danney Goble, who notes that Phillips considered FDR a “crackpot” who would “destroy this country and the institutions we love.”⁹

Historians speculate that Phillips was a voice for private power interests. For whatever reasons, he contended that the power production facilities made the project illegal. At his insistence, the spillway was lowered 20 feet — reducing the area of impoundment and prompting critics to blame the Corps 20 years later when the June 6, 1957, flood topped the spillway.¹⁰